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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to understand the variability in student evaluations, a study was undertaken at the beginning of the fall 1972 semester to analyze California students' initial course expectations. A Course Questionnaire was designed consisting of a total of 19 statements with a six-point response rating scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire was administered to approximately 850 students enrolled in courses ranging from "Marriage and the Family" to "Nutrition" offered by the CSUN Home Economics Department. Results of the study indicated that the greatest consensus occured in the areas of teaching style and grading, where students overwhelmingly want resource speakers brought into the class, appropriate audiovisual media, and the grading policy for the course stated at the beginning of the semester. (Author)

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"IS THERE A CONSENSUS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS COURSE EXPECTATIONS?" [1]

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One of the outcomes of student unrest on college campuses was the demand for "relevance" in education. Recent decreases in university enrollment have raised further questions about what students are seeking. In responding to the stress Van Waes (1968) noted that we need to listen to student complaints to determine the source of their frustration and dissatisfaction. Attempts to determine what is "relevant" and what is "most insistent" to university students frequently have taken the form of end of semester student evaluations of professor's style and conduct of courses. These evaluations are published in many universities and used by students as a guide in selecting their programs. A comprehensive annotated listing of the many studies and articles dealing with the worth of student evaluations is found in Miller's (1972) book on "Evaluating Faculty Performance". The general theme running through the annotations is agreement that student evaluations provide a

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valuable source of feedback to the professors and students. However, doubt is cast on the validity of the procedures and measures used and the effectiveness of such evaluations in bringing about changes.

The inherent complexity of teacher evaluation is summarized by Neeley (1968): "Teachers have been rated and evaluated since the beginning of teaching and may expect to be evaluated in the future. But there is not, even in this day of standardized tests, a new and objective way of evaluating teachers. There is a lack of agreement among authorities as to what constitutes a good teacher. A review of literature over the past twenty-five years indicated no objective usable criterion for identifying effective teachers."

Although there is general agreement among the university community as to the value of an ongoing student evaluation process for improving professorial competencies (Wilson-Hildebrand), the end of semester evaluations have not answered, for the vast majority of professors, the question as to precisely what changes should be instituted or effected in teaching style and course content.

One of the writers of this paper found after years of soliciting anonymous student evaluations and trying to implement the suggestions that something was lacking in the guidelines for change produced by the end of semester student evaluations. For example, the students would recommend less

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lecture time and more time devoted to student discussions. The next semester the professor anxious to improve, to "turn on" and to satisfy the students would reduce direct lecture time and increase student discussions, only to discover that the student evaluations at the end of that semester indicated they wanted more direct lecture time and less discussion. This confusion and inability to achieve congruence between what the students appeared to desire and the sincere efforts of the professor to implement positive change to satisfy these suggestions finally lead to an "Aha" phenomenon that most studies dealing with student evaluations of their professors have omitted a critical variable from their methodology. The omission involves the failure to take into account at the beginning of the semester the entry expectations of each new group of students enrolled in a particular course. Instead, we continue to use as a guide to course style and conduct changes, the end of semester evaluations of a collection of individuals who may no longer significantly represent the expectations of the next group of students. In this connection, Ericksen (1970) discussing the complexity of college teaching stated: "Students with sharply differing motivational sets do not hear or read the same things and to a certain extent may hardly be participating in the same course." In order to obtain a picture of the beginning of the semester student expectations in the areas of

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teaching style, grading and the desired outcomes in course content, a study was undertaken. It was hoped that it would be possible to identify a significant student consensus. If so, this information could be used by the professor to confirm the direction of his course design or to initiate changes appropriate to that particular group of students.

For the sake of readability, the details of the methodology and the various statistical tests used in the study will be eliminated or summarized in this paper. Those readers desiring a copy of the total report are invited to write to the authors.

Using 833 undergraduate and graduate students (primarily female) enrolled in both general education courses and those designed for majors offered by the Department of Home Economics at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), the attempt to fill the gap in the student evaluation process was launched. The courses were in the areas of marriage and family relations, child growth and development, textiles and nutrition.

Those of you who have read to this point in the article are invited to skim the "CSUN Course Expectation Questionnaire" which is reprinted below and predict which questions if any obtained an overwhelming (80% or greater) strongly agree student response?

- - - - - - - - - - - - -

Insert Table 1 here

- - - - - - - - - - - - -

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Table 1

CSUN Course Expectations Questionnaire

Please Complete:

Course_____ Age at Nearest Birthday

Current Class Level 18_____ 22-24_____

Freshman_____ 19_____ 25-29_____

Sophomore_____ 20_____ 30-34_____

Junior_____ 21_____ 35-40_____

Senior_____ 41 & over___

Graduate_____ Sex

Unclassified_____ Female_____Male_____

For each of the following statements, circle the number in the right margin that indicates your reaction to the statement. Circle according to the guide below.

6 strongly agree
5 agree
4 not sure but probably agree
3 not sure but probably disagree
2 disagree
1 strongly disagree

1. I would prefer lectures by the Professor with a minimum of class discussion. 6 5 4 3 2 1
2. I would prefer primarily class discussions. 6 5 4 3 2 1
3. I would prefer a combination of 1 and 2. 6 5 4 3 2 1

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4.	I would prefer position and other papers prepared by and presented by individual students.	6 5 4 3 2 1
5.	I would prefer organized student group presentations (e.g. panels).	6 5 4 3 2 1
6.	I believe resource speakers would be worthwhile bringing in to lecture to the class.	6 5 4 3 2 1
7.	Appropriately selected media such as films, and tapes add to the interest of the course.	6 5 4 3 2 1
8.	I would like the class divided into groups with similar interests for the purpose of buzz, brain-storming, and encounter sessions.	6 5 4 3 2 1
9.	I believe a pretest should be given at the very beginning to assess the student's present knowledge of the course content.	6 5 4 3 2 1
10.	Students should be completely free to pursue their own interests in the course.	6 5 4 3 2 1
11.	The basis for assigning grades should be clearly designated by the professor at the beginning of the semester.	6 5 4 3 2 1
12.	Students should be permitted to assign themselves grades.	6 5 4 3 2 1

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13. Assignment of grades should be a joint decision of professor and student. 6 5 4 3 2 1

Outcomes you would like to acquire from this course:

14. Basic scientific knowledge and data in this field. 6 5 4 3 2 1
15. How and where to obtain information and data in this field. 6 5 4 3 2 1
16. Primarily applied, functional knowledge and practices. 6 5 4 3 2 1
17. Combination of scientific and applied knowledge. 6 5 4 3 2 1
18. Broad overview of key concepts in the field. 6 5 4 3 2 1
19. Motivation to learn more about the field. 6 5 4 3 2 1

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If you chose questions 6, 7, 11, 16, 18 and 19 your predictions of the results were correct. In the areas of teaching style and grading, students overwhelmingly want: resource speakers brought in to the class (question 6 - 83%); appropriate audio-visual media used (question 7 - 86%); and the grading policy for the course stated at the beginning of the semester (question 11 - 86%). Regarding course content outcomes students want: primarily applied, functional knowledge and practices (question 16 - 88%); broad overview of key concepts in the field (question 19 - 80%) and motivation to learn more about the field (question 19 - 80%). Other statements students regarded very favorably were: a combination of lecture and discussion (question 3 - 72%); how and where to find information (question 15 - 73%) and a combination of scientific and applied knowledge (question 7 - 74%).

The results of the study indicate that a beginning of the semester assessment of student course expectations will give the professor a picture of the consensus and diversity of interests of those enrolled. Such an analysis may be utilized by the instructor to implement change early in the semester. The direction the professor should follow is by no means clearcut. Even before the students know the professor, the puzzling information obtained from the course expectations analysis is the students' overwhelming preference for resource speakers and audio-visual

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media to lectures by the professor. Some professors now regularly using the California State University, Northridge Course Expectation Questionnaire report the same strong preference shown for resource speakers and audio-visual media. However, the professors note that a discussion of the expectation results with their students helps both professor and students establish a better initial rapport.

There are other questions still to be resolved in the student/professor evaluation process. One of the most critical is the definition of what constitutes a significant consensus? Should a majority of one or 75% or just what number of those enrolled in a course be sufficient for a professor to initiate change and pursue the direction selected by the students? Will the use of a statistic tend to eclipse the individual whose expectations vary greatly from measures of statistical significance? To avoid relegating individual students to anonymity, should the "CSUN Course Expectation Questionnaire" be signed so that the professor can be made aware of individual student interests? How often during the semester should the professor solicit student evaluations and initiate changes? Are quality of instruction and popularity synonymous?

These and other questions relating to "meeting the needs of college and university students for relevance,"

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require continued examination. Although the CSUN Course Expectation questionnaire does not answer for the professor the question of "how to be all things to all students", it does assist the professor to confirm the design of his course by tuning in to the expectations of each new group of individuals in a course - a dimension omitted from the end of semester student evaluations.

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